Director’s Corner: Lifeworthy Learning

David Perkins, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, frames the future of learning in terms of six “Beyonds”, or ways in which educators are “reimagining education with much less ’niche learning’” and much more “lifeworthy learning”. He encourages us to aim beyond local to more global perspectives, beyond learning mere content to developing 21st century skills, beyond understanding topics to using knowledge as tools for thinking and action, beyond prescribed studies to more personalized curricula, beyond discrete disciplines to more interdisciplinary investigation, and beyond traditional disciplines to more extended visions of their possibilities.

(See http://mpmengaged.wordpress.com/tag/future-of-learning/.)

As part of the Children’s School professional development, our educators are exploring “The Art of Possibility: Transforming Professional and Personal Life”, a book of practices by Rosamund Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander published in 2000. I used the book to study the practices with the staff in 2004 after our first round of NAEYC accreditation and then felt a similar need to stretch our thinking beyond “meeting the standards” (all 400+ of them) after our successful reaccreditation last spring. A major point of the book is that the story we tell ourselves, or our frames of thinking, both define and confine us so that we do most of our thinking inside the box. Once we admit to ourselves that the way we narrate the story is all an invention, then we can enlarge the box so that we can consider a whole set of new possibilities that were always present but never before apparent to us.

To “Admit It’s All Invented” is about examining underlying assumptions. When facing challenges, the Zanders suggest asking, “What assumption am I making, that I’m not aware I’m making, that gives me what I see?” and then, “What might I now invent, that I haven’t yet invented, that would give me other choices?” Using this perspective on problem solving, we have made strides in creatively designing and funding facility improvements, managing space and scheduling conflicts, planning and implementing meaningful and challenging thematic studies for young children, and increasing opportunities for engaging professional development for even our most experienced educators.

Throughout our book study, we collectively wondered why we had to wait until adulthood to learn the “Art of Possibility” practices, which are necessary for a future of lifeworthy learning. Once again, we uncovered a hidden assumption and decided to seek possibilities for helping our children open themselves to thinking in terms of possibilities. Our approach in recent months has been to collect a variety of children’s books to help launch discussions with the children. In my Director’s Corner articles this year, I plan to introduce you to the twelve “Art of Possibility” practices and to suggest ways that families can support the use of these practices to transform their thinking and their lives.

The first practice, “Admit It’s All Invented”, is about learning to question the story “everybody knows” and narrate a more positive story “that brightens our life and the lives of people around us (p. 12).” I suggest you start with a story time reading of “Amazing Grace” by Mary Hoffman. Let yourselves be inspired by Grace’s courage to challenge the limitations of race and gender so that you consider new ways for each of your family members to contribute positively and productively at home, at school, and in the community. We look forward to working in partnership with you to encourage each of our unique children to thrive!